

# A Review of Taste, Ties and Time: Ethics of Research

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## Introduction

The decade of explosive growth of the Internet has revolutionised how people look for information, enabled new possibilities in communication, and is at the cusp of revolutionising social science research. However, this golden age for research (Watts, 2014), made possible by Facebook and other social networking sites, are at the perils of being halted due to poor understanding of privacy and ethical implications by scientists, institutions and the general public. The release of “Tastes, Ties, and Time (T3)” dataset has triggered ethical debates on computational social science research. Despite attempts to protect the identity of the institution and the privacy of the subjects, the source of the data was quickly decoded, placing the subjects at substantial informational risk. Using the T3 project as a case study, this paper attempts to assess the ethical oversights of the paper with Salganik’s four principles of ethical research – Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for Law and Public Interest – and discuss the possibility of future research with the same dataset.

## Respect for Persons

The paper has failed to comply to the respect for persons principle as no consent to obtain personal information was sought from the individuals of the study. In fact, study subjects were kept in the dark throughout the whole research project. While Kaufman (2008) argues that all the information in the dataset were from Facebook and already “public”, their Facebook data collection methods were nowhere close to accessing only readily available “public” information. The use of research assistants, within the network of their sample, may have resulted in an extraction of user information, which was otherwise been restricted to their private network. (Zimmer, 2010) Furthermore, the dataset was supplemented with housing data from the university, which was not previously “public” information.

## Beneficence

The benefits of using data from Facebook are manifold. Facebook provides an unprecedented amount of detailed personal information that can be tracked over time (Lewis et Al, 2008), avoids measurement errors of surveys and questionnaires (Wejnert, 2010), and expands the size of networks analyzed (Lewis et Al, 2008). However, the lack of foresight and skills of the researchers in “Taste, Ties, and Time” has resulted in a failure to minimise cost.

Researchers outlined various measures<sup>1</sup> to mitigate informational risks, but to no avail. The source of the data was identified few days after the release of the data. Although the researchers were trained as “sociologists, not technologists” (Kaufman, 2008), researchers could have sought advice from data

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<sup>1</sup> The various measures include the anonymization of the subjects of the dataset, delaying the release of unique information such as cultural interests, requiring other researchers to consent their “terms and conditions for use” and going through their institutional review board.

protection experts to enhance security of these highly sensitive data and circumvented this episode. (Zimmer, 2008)

However, the damage control efforts were commendable. The dataset was withdrawn as soon as the researchers realised that the source of the data was decoded and the privacy of study subjects was in jeopardy. The fast reaction of the T3 researchers could be one of the reasons, why no one was ultimately harmed or undermined in this project. Thus, I would argue that principle of beneficence was partially violated, due to the underestimation of information risks.

## **Justice**

The justice principle was less controversial in the T3 research. There was no known exploitation of vulnerable groups, the entire network data was collated for a college cohort. However, one can certainly nitpick that Harvard University students are hardly representative of the general population.

## **Respect of Law and Public Interest**

The Respect of Law in T3 paper is uncontended, with researchers receiving approvals from both the institutional review board (IRB) of the university and Facebook. However, respect for public interest was not fulfilled in this research project. Public interest is at stake as the laws governing the IRB has been outmoded by the ever changing digital world. For instance, IRBs use the presence of a username and password to determine the privacy of a website. However, privacy settings have evolved to become more complex and nuanced<sup>2</sup> than a dichotomous relationship. Furthermore, the T3 researchers have consistently displayed a lack of understanding of privacy on social networking sites in their open replies to ethical contentions of their project. (Zimmer, 2011) The lack of understanding of ethical implications by researchers and institutions have compromised privacy rights of the general public.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I consider the T3 dataset highly valuable for social research and would use it in my future research, if given the opportunity to. I will, however, pursue a different approach to ensure that the respect for persons principle will be adhered to. Informed consent will be obtained via email contact. Emails will be sent to study subjects, highlighting that their data was collected eight years ago and will be used to further social science, and they have an option to opt-out and their information will be deleted from the database. I will also comply to Beneficence principle by keeping the dataset private, maximising all the benefits of this rich and massive dataset, while incurring less informational risks but less transparency. Prior to conducting my research, I will seek approval from the IRB and relevant authorities to ensure compliance with the laws. Furthermore, researchers and lawmakers, today, are more equipped to uphold public interests with updated guiding principles in the Menlo Report. (Bailey et al, 2012)

Even though the T3 researchers failed to adhere to these principles eight years ago, it does not imply that future research will not be able to. Researchers and lawmakers can learn from the mistakes of previous research projects and continue to uphold the four principles of ethical research. Therefore, I hold an

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<sup>2</sup> Several social networking sites, including Facebook, require users to login to their accounts with a username and password. However, the availability of information posted is determined by the profile owner, who can make the information available public. (Morena et. Al, 2013)

optimistic outlook on the future use of similar datasets, and believe that it would be a pity if similar research were deterred due to few misfortunate incidents in the nascent field of computational social science.

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